

When expertise is not enough

Next generation learns importance of soft skills

By DEREK SANKEY, Postmedia News, September 25, 2010

Theory and technical knowledge might get you onto the shortlist, but in this competitive labour market it's the skills gained outside the classroom that will separate you from the crowd, according to recruiters and educators.

For Clayton Weins, a second-year arts degree student at the University of British Columbia, it meant pursuing an unpaid summer internship recently for the B.C. SPCA to differentiate himself from the competition.

The 19-year-old says he'll likely major in English with a minor in commerce. The internship was a chance to get some real-world experience and to help define his future career path.

"The best way to figure out what I want to do is to get some hands-on experience," says Weins, who has a passion for the non-profit sector. "It was definitely a learning experience. There was kind of some shock because I had some weaknesses that I never knew about going into it."

Even though it was eight to 12 hours a week, the job also helped him land an administrative job to earn some money for school. "It helped me a ton, it definitely did," he says.

The so-called "soft skills" are what recruiters hone in on. The ability to lead, to manage teams and your own projects efficiently, as well as the ability to creatively solve problems are more practical attributes than grades or previous job titles.

"Communication is so essential," says Glenn Tibbles, with Knightsbridge Human Capital Solutions. Employers aren't as concerned with technical ability- it's considered a prerequisite- as they are with a worker's ability to innovate and drive performance for the company, he adds.

Carol Naylor, associate director of career development for UBC Career Services, says there is increasing demand for skills that can only be gained through experience.

"They're looking for students who come with a pattern of consistently seeking out experiences outside the classroom," says Naylor. "That's when they're developing their communication and teamwork skills."

Whether job seekers are recent grads or have several years of experience, she encourages them to take on volunteer roles and get involved in challenging experiences that initially might be out of their comfort zone.

Internships, co-op placements or work terms are all valuable ways for post-secondary students to gain the experience. Weins spent time sitting in on meetings and got to see firsthand how professionals interact.

"If I had not done the internship and just gone through with my bachelor's degree and looked for a job after that, I would have run into so many problems," says Weins.

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